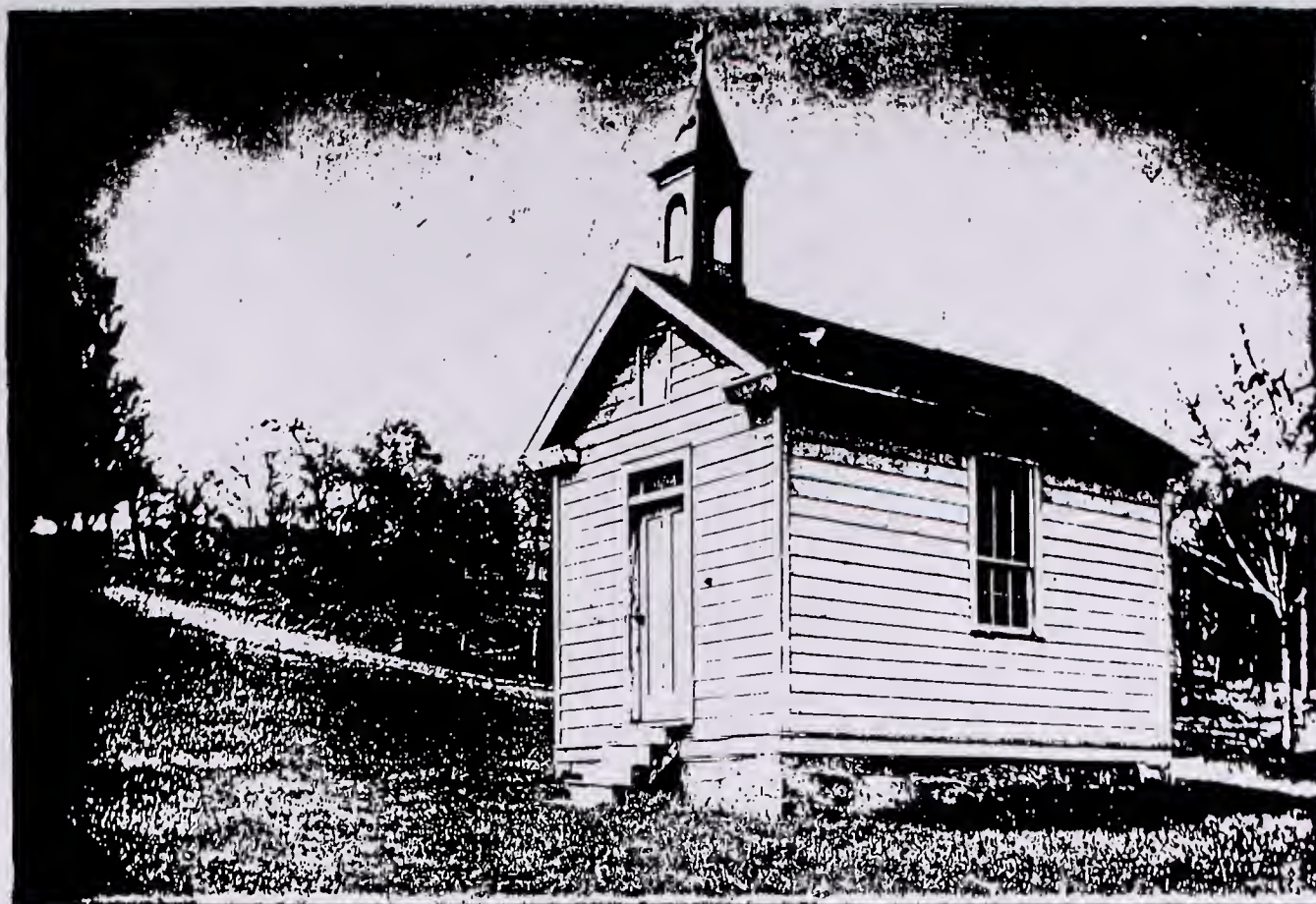


Decker's Chapel







The Chapel is built of wood and consists of one small room, a small altar and wooden pews. The Chapel is open every day all year around for visitors.

Decker's Chapel is believed to be one of the smallest churches in the World. The Chapel was dedicated in the memory of Monsignor M. J. Decker. Consummation of the Chapel also took place September 23, 1928. A historical stone monument was erected with the following inscription:





The Daily Press  
September 24, 1928

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# LARGE DELEGATION ATTENDS EXERCISES AT DECKER MEMORIAL

Estimated That Over Two  
Thousand Attended Field  
Mass and Dedicatory  
Morning

The climax of many weeks of hard work on the part of St. Marys Assembly Fourth Degree Knights of Columbus was reached yesterday morning with the dedication to the late Monsignor Michael J. Decker at the spot where many times in his early Priesthood he celebrated the sacrifice of the mass led by the Knights of St. George Band, Cadet Officers and the National Colors carried by two color guards, the procession left the Borough Line at South St. Marys Street at nine thirty five a.m. All the catholic societies in town were in line and midway in the line of march the St. Marys Band furnished martial music. Back of the St. Marys Delegation a large crowd of out of town people joined the procession. Then following the marchers came hundreds of cars that were later parked for one-half mile along the state highway in either direction from the chapel grounds. The traffic was especially well handled by Chief of Police Yetzer, Members of the Junior Patrol, Corporal Russell Barker and Private John Shea of the State Police, stationed at Drummond, Sergeant Ray Nuhfer and Corporal Joseph Ann of the State Highway Patrol, stationed at Ridgway.

At ten o'clock the procession reached the chapel grounds while people occupied every vantage point overlooking the portable altar where at ten twenty o'clock, Rev. Father John Heibel of St. John's Church at Erie, celebrated Mass. Rev. Father John B. Tipp of Kersey acted as Deacon. The celebrant of the mass was a protege of Monsignor Decker and in his sermon he paid an impressive tribute to the cleric who made it possible for him to also reach the dignity of Priesthood.

Eight Members of the Fourth Degree Assembly of St. Marys acted as Guard of Honor at the mass.

Following the religious ceremonies, the dedicatory exercises were held. Just northeast of the chapel, where on many occasions, the Monsignor whose memory was honored yesterday read mass, a four ton native stone quarried at Boot Jack quarry stood. The unveiling was performed by Miss Kathleen Walsh of this city. Upon the monument a bronze plaque bore the following inscription:

## IN MEMORY OF MONSIGNOR M. J. DECKER

Born - September 3rd 1829  
Ordained - October 5th, 1862  
Died - April 10th, 1913

Elk County Gazette  
September 26, 1929

## HUNDREDS ATTEND FIELD MASS SUNDAY

Hundreds of people—many from long distances—attended the Field Mass, the first annual affair to be held at the Decker Chapel, on the Kersey road, last Sunday. The weather was ideal for outdoor worship, and the occasion was solemnized by the offering of the Mass under the blue of the September sky.

At ten o'clock the procession formed at the Borough Line on South St. Marys

# Decker Chapel Lighted For First Time

Nov. 12, 1955

Wayside Shrine  
Has Inside,  
Outside Lights

For more than 25 years St. Marys Assembly Fourth Degree Knights of Columbus, has been custodian of Decker Chapel, a wayside shrine on the Million Dollar Highway, a short distance from St. Marys borough line as a memorial to the late Monsignor Michael J. Decker, who in his youth lived in the immediate neighborhood.

Each year hundreds visit this quiet place of prayer and meditation as can be seen from the registry book with all parts of United States and Canada represented.

To make the chapel shrine more attractive the chapel committee in September authorized the installation of lights inside and outside the chapel, turned on last night for the first time.

The lights will be on each night from now on.

The Fourth Degree Assembly today thanks relatives and friends of Monsignor Decker for their help in keeping the altar so beautiful at all times and the floors and walls clean and spotless.

The following Knights have served on the chapel committee in past years:

M. H. Walsh, John A. Dippold, Charles J. Schaut, C. J. Krellner, J. F. O'Leary, Charles Ambuske, George Cuneo.

Present committee members are James G. Shaffer, Leo Hau, Eugene Krauss. They invite residents of St. Marys and vicinity to visit the shrine and register their names.



## DECKER'S CHAPEL

Decker's Chapel is believed to be one of the smallest churches in the world. Located about three miles south from the center of St. Marys on the Million Dollar Highway (Route 255).

The chapel was built in 1856 to provide a comunal center for prayers in fulfillment of a vow made by Michael Decker, father of Monsignor Decker.

For years neighbors gathered nightly especially during the lenten season to recite the Rosary. During the first World War, the Catholic Mothers with sons in the Armed Forces made pilgramages there to offer up prayers for the safety of their loved ones.

The chapel stood on the Decker property and in 1928, the site and building were acquired by the Fourth Degree Assembly who restored the beauty of the chapel.

The grounds were improved and beautified, and later on a fine historical marker was erected to preserve this quaint little church.

The chapel is built of wood and consists of one small room, a small altar and wooden pews. Visitors are welcome to view the church year around.



**DECKER'S CHAPEL** — A small white building on a plot of green, Decker's Chapel stands as the only remaining wayside chapel of the several built by Bavarian settlers around St. Marys from the 1840s through the 1860s. Tucked away in a corner lot along a developing commercial strip, it is now eligible for placement on the National Register of Historic Places.

*Photos by Cress*



**SIMPLE WOODEN ALTAR** — The interior of Decker's Chapel features a simple wooden altar complete with a daily devotional Bible and pictures of Mary and Jesus.





### **The Story of Decker's Chapel**

Michael Decker was working in his apple orchard when he fell from a tree, injuring his back. As a deeply religious man, he made a vow to construct and maintain this quaint country chapel if the injury would heal.

He built Decker's Chapel in 1856, and it is still maintained today.

Decker's Chapel has been called the smallest church in the U.S.A. Its visitors book includes names from throughout the country and the world.



Inside views of the Chapel (1985)



# Chapel eligible for National Register

## The door opens for future preservation of roadside shrine

By JOSEPH D. CRESS  
Elk County Reporter

It stands a silent testament of faith along the bustle of the Million Dollar Highway.

A simple white building on an island of grass surrounded by waves of progress.

And yet, this sanctuary has endured for over a hundred years as a symbol of pride to the people of Elk County.

Now its spirit can inspire the nation.

Decker's Chapel has been deemed eligible for placement on the National Register of Historic Places, said Noma Olay, president of the Elk County Historical Society.

The decision, made this August by the Pennsylvania Historic and Museum Commission, opens the door for future preservation of the roadside shrine under threat by the growth in development along Route 255.

A gift to God from a grateful farmer, the chapel sits across from the entryway to Wal-Mart and next door to the newly built Best Western motel, noted County Planner Daniel Freeburg in his narrative to the state agency.

"It's being severely encroached upon," he said. "It's really kind of swallowed

up by the concrete and development."

As the chapel's current owner, the society approached Freeburg in early July, asking for his help in filling out the initial paperwork. He agreed and conducted research on the building's 141-year history.

Specifically, Freeburg gathered information from books on St. Marys and the former Benzinger Township kept in the society's museum library. He also uncovered a World War II era issue of Carbon Copy, a newsletter put out by the Stackpole Carbon Company, which mentioned Decker's Chapel.

In his research, Freeburg also drew background from a feature story written by Helen V. Tuttle of Benezette and the book "A History of Elk County" published by the historical society in 1981.

Using this material, he prepared a description and historical narrative which he submitted with the eligibility application on July 18. See other story. A month later, the society received a letter from the PHMC, stating the chapel fits the criteria to be considered for placement on the register.

"I was very thrilled," Olay

said. "It should be quite a little feather in our hat."

Freeburg agrees. "I look on it as a great start for the society."

For actual placement on the register, an extensive follow-up application will have to be prepared and submitted for review.

"This is extremely time-consuming," he said. "Every fact has to be validated. The state wants very thorough, exact and complete information."

As much as Freeburg would like to help on a project dear to his interest, he doesn't have the time to fill out the application. Besides, in all the cases he's familiar with, a consultant is brought in to prepare the paperwork associated with this second stage.

Olay stated the society intends to proceed with the

follow-up application, but needs money to hire a professional. She added the society is looking at a contract proposal submitted by Taylor & Taylor of Brookville — a firm that has done over 100 of these applications, according to Freeburg.

"We have yet to pursue all the different avenues to get funding," she said, noting the society is non-profit and accepts contributions from interested groups, businesses and individuals.

Getting the chapel listed would not only encourage a renewed sense of pride, but would also attract tourists who travel the country interested in visiting register sites, Freeburg said.

He believes, in the coming years, the local tourist trade will become big business transforming the economy of

Elk County or at least giving it an added dimension.

Freeburg added eligibility status also opens the way for the society to apply for grants through the Keystone Historic Preservation program. He explained to qualify for Keystone money, a property has to be either already on the register or declared eligible.

Such funds can be used to repair and maintain the chapel. "It takes a beating sitting there along the four-lane," Freeburg said.

*Checks can be made out to the Chapel Decker Fund and sent care of the Elk County Historical Society, P.O. Box 361, 109 Center St., Ridgway, Pa. 15853. Money raised through this fund will go directly into the upkeep of the chapel and the effort to get it placed on the register.*



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IN MEMORIAM

Monsignor  
Michael Joseph Decker



Distributed Upon Event of Dedication of Monument  
to His Memory at St. Marys, Pa.

Sunday, September 23, 1928

With Brief Biography by  
ALBERT G. BREHM

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MONSIGNOR MICHAEL JOSEPH DECKER

*LIFE*  
*OF*  
*MONSIGNOR MICHAEL J. DECKER*

The cool of an early September morning lay over the pall-like stillness of Western Pennsylvania's forest tracts; already the soft maples were perting up in crimson and gold, while here and there an occasional cornflower peeped from behind sagging brush and briar, when on, over a road that could be called little more than a trail, came three youths, headed southward. They were scholasticates, on their way back to school after having spent the summer vacation at their homes in the hills. One was the son of Michael Decker, a sturdy, German farmer, and the others the Pilz boys, on their way back to St. Vincents College where they were studying with the hope of becoming Priests of the Catholic Church. And they walked the distance—about 125 miles—carrying for lunch along the way some loaves of bread, "gouged out in the middle", as has been said, and the hollow thus provided filled with butter. Some cool spring along the wayside, or some little brook, provided them with drink. Each carried a pack containing extra clothing—enough to tide them thru until the next vacation. The Decker boy became Monsignor Decker, and the Pilz boys the Rev. Father Gerhard and the Rev. Placidus, both of the Order of St. Benedict, and each of whom reached a high estate in his choosen calling.

Looking back in retrospect over the years since these boys first shouldered luggage and lunch for their long and tedious march over unbroken forest tracts that they might attend school and thus fit themselves for the calling which was the dominant urge in each, we can only in a measure conceive the faith which was theirs to thus suffer hardships and self denials in order that their ambition might be realized, but it is safe to say that the strength and determination thus inspired did not all come from Self, nor from terrestrial suggestion and exhortations; surely God must have given His blessing and grace, for without, Man is but a reed in the wind.

It is the life of Monsignor Decker that interests us most at this time, for thru his high character, grace, education, talents, and personality he attained a station among the Catholic clergy of Western Pennsylvania that is reached by only very few men, and then only by those who can rightfully be called great.

In the little "dorf" of Parsberg, in Bavaria, Germany, there lived Michael Decker, who had taken for his wife Barbara Hierl. The second child, born September 3rd, 1839, was named Michael Joseph the subject of this sketch. The father was a farmer, and the mother often left her household duties to assist in the fields. They were God fearing people, devout Catholics, and their family life was what might be considered idealistic from a religious point of view.



Five other children were born to the Decker union, and of these four were taken from them in infancy by death. The other surviving child was George, who came to St. Marys with his parents, and lived to a ripe old age. He married Katherine Weigel and raised a large family.

The decedents of this union have formed a large community of relatives thru marriage and the family established has become a rather extensive one. In all, even to the present younger generation, has been planted the honor and respect of "Herr Unke!", as Father Decker was reverently known by them, thru personal contact and thru tradition.

The oppression of the peasant farmer under Gernian rule, together with the sorrowful memories brought by the little graves in the "kirchhof" induced the parents to seek a change of residence, and America, that mecca of the oppressed of the world, loomed up as a haven of hope. Once the decision to emigrate was reached, the family set sail from Bremen in one of the old sailing vessels, which usually required from two to three months to make the trip across the Atlantic Ocean. Stories of almost incredible hardships—sickness, lack of sanitation, improper ventilation, and over all the tediousness of steerage passage thru periods extending over months according to the caprices of wind and weather are told of crossing the ocean in those days. When all went well the ship would land at the point for which it first steered its course; if not, some other port would have to do as was the case of the Bush family, early St. Marys settlers who, instead of being landed at New York, were set off at Montreal, Canada, and came to the settlement by way of the St. Lawrence River, Erie, and thru the wilderness by way of what is now Warren and Kane. Is it to be wondered, then, that when good fortune made it possible for the captain to keep the ship on its course and land at the port of destination that the passengers rejoiced?

The long and tedious third class voyage ended at Baltimore where directly upon landing, thanksgiving was offered to Almighty God at the foot of the altar in the Redemptorist church of St. Alphonsus. By a strange coincidence it was on this altar, fifty-four years later, that the child, Michael Joseph, now Right Reverend Monsignor M. J. Decker, preached one of his eloquent sermons upon the occasion of the centenary celebration of the establishment of that parish.

The landing of the Decker family on our shores took place in 1846, when the German American Catholic Brotherhood Society was still quite active. This was an organization for the promotion of the welfare of German American Catholics, with headquarters at Philadelphia and Baltimore, and it was this organization which was primarily interested in the colonization of what is now St. Marys, Pennsylvania. It was the party of scouts of this society that first blazed a trail from Bellefonte and Smethport turnpike at Kersey to the banks of Elk Creek, over which came the first sturdy Germans to settle the new haven for religious freedom.

At this period Pennsylvania was still covered with virgin forests. Only here and there, especially outside the pale of the few centers of population, was a settlement to be found. Turnpikes and post roads were the only avenues that led into the uncharted forests. That part which has since become Elk County was traversed by one such road, leading from Bellefonte thru Snow Shoe, Philipsburg, Karthaus, and on to Smethport, passing thru Kersey and Ridgway. This road was used until the building of the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1864 as a means of bringing in

supplies. The settlers came up this pike to what is now Kersey, named after John Kersey, agent for Fox Land Company, and then across the hills to the settlement that had been founded as a place for the German Catholic people who desired religious freedom and that had been named St. Marys in honor of the Blessed Virgin, upon whose feast day, December 8th, the first settlers arrived here. Thru the benevolence of Col. Benzinger the land here could be bought at a very small cost, and could be paid for on very modest terms. By an act passed April 3rd, 1792, the price of vacant land owned by the Government was set at fifty shillings a hundred acres, or about six and two thirds cents per acre. Col. Benzinger had bought 6600 acres from the Fox Land Company at 75 cents per acre, and sold it to the settlers at but very little advance in cost.

Directed by officials of the Society, whose first spiritual representative to the colony was Father Alexander Czwitskevitz of sacred memory, the Deckers journeyed into the wilds and eventually reached the settlement, choosing ground lying along the trail traversed into the village, about a mile from the edge of the colony. A spot was cleared and a log cabin was erected, but soon afterwards this was replaced by a house built of sand stone. It was cozily arranged, with a big open fireplace in the basement and the regulation fruit drying and meat smoking apertures in the wide chimney. The father devoted himself to farming on the clearing of the land, and later drifted into lumbering. His sons, George and Michael attended the village schools and assisted about the farm and home in spare hours and during the summer months.

At this time the school system of the new town was still far from being what it is today. Several rooms had been provided by the priests near the old monastery, on the site now occupied by the Andrew Kaul Memorial Hospital, and the children had to walk thru the woods to attend, for the land between the little town proper and the monastery had not yet been cleared. The school was taught by sisters who had been brought here for that purpose. Mother Benedict Reip, in June, 1852, came to this country and right on to St. Marys, where she established the first Benedictine convent in America. She was accompanied by Sister Maura, and soon drew about her a number of novices so that in October, 1853, twelve novices were received. This was upon the occasion of the arrival of Sisters Scholastica, Alexia, and Lidwina, coming from the Motherhouse of St. Walburga's Convent in Germany. Among the twelve who took their first vows at that time were Sister Bernardo, who died but a few years ago. Two Redemptorist Brothers, Joseph and Xaverius, also taught here at about the time the Decker children began their school life, but the brothers taught the little school that stood in the "Neuland" district, not far from the present Bucktail Trail. The distance which the Deckers had to walk to attend school was about two miles and thus early did the future priest attain hardihood and strength of endurance physically.

But, since Michael Joseph Decker entered St. Vincents College, in 1850, we must go back a little further than the advent of the good Sisters and thus we find that prior to 1848 (or for the first two years of the child's school life) the public school was taught by Redemptorist Fathers, who had been brought here soon after the town was settled. In 1848 a school district was organized, with Gerhard Schoening, president, Ignatius Garner secretary, and Louis Vollmer, treasurer. George Weis, Adam Vollmer, and Philip Stephen were members of the first board. A man by name of T. B. Klarinaar was the first teacher, coming



here in 1847, and receiving \$25.00 per month for his services. At the time the Sisters came to take charge, in 1852, Ignatius Garner was president of the school board and George Weigel was secretary and with the tax duplicate at but \$387.39, the building of a new school was undertaken. However, it is only up to 1850 that the early local conditions were closely related to the life of Father Decker, for after that period his days here were those he spent while on vacation, sick leave or while visiting.

The school system of the early days was far from what it now is. All classes were heard in the German language but, by way of offering the pupils a means of broadened education there was one hour of English taught each day. The curriculum was restricted to writing, spelling, and arithmetic, with the principal portion of the day devoted to the Catechism and Bible history. The school terms were short, beginning after the farm work was done in fall, and terminating in time to give the children a chance to assist with the spring work.

It was in such environments that the boy, Michael, first felt the call to Holy Orders. Altho still a child—having not yet reached the age of eleven years, he entered St. Vincents College, which had been recently established. This was in 1850; from then until 1859 he applied himself diligently to his studies. Each fall he walked to the College, and back again in the spring. Being of sturdy built, and robust in health, he did not seem to mind the trip overly much.

An incident which nearly cost his life is told by an eye witness to the affair. Michael, when still quite young, had been sent to town to purchase a cent's worth of snuff for his father. While crossing the foot bridge over Elk Creek on South St. Marys street, which bridge consisted of two logs lying side by side, he tripped and fell into the water, which was quite deep at the time, due to a freshet. Only the timely arrival of help saved the lad from death by drowning. Strange at it may seem, the person who saw the boy fall into the water later became his sister-in-law, thru marriage. The person was a little girl, Katherine Weigel, who later married George Decker and the incident often was alluded to even in the Prelate's later life.

After the Pilz brothers entered the Benedictine Order, Michael Joseph Decker made the trip to college alone. On one occasion, having new shoes (doubtless coarse and heavy ones), his feet became so blistered that he could scarcely drag himself along. Presently he saw a house at the foot of a hill. With renewed courage he started towards it. The kind-hearted housewife saw the boy limping painfully along, the tears he could not repress, coursing down his cheeks. She came out to meet him, made him welcome, removed his shoes, bathed his poor, galled feet, doctored them up with home remedies, sent him to bed, and carried him his supper. Next morning he went on his way rejoicing. Relating this in after years, the Monsignor said: "Although I do not know her name, I shall remember that woman with gratitude as long as I live". Kind acts like kind words can never die.

Another time having to cross an arid plain, devastated by a recent fire, he was so parched by thirst that he was ready to faint from exhaustion. He threw himself on the earth, and prayed for a drink. Putting his ear to the ground he heard the trickling of water. He followed the sound and reached a spring. Falling on his knees, he thanked God before he brought the welcome liquid to his parched lips.

The following incident occurred long after he reached manhood.

He was introduced to a United States Senator who remarked that although they had never met he had reason to remember the name of Michael Decker. It seems that the future senator did not like his books any better than does the average school-boy, and his report was not satisfactory to "paterfamilias", who accordingly called the student to account, saying, "You young rascal there is a Decker boy who walks all the way to College, and is doing so much better than you". "Then", said the honorable gentleman, "he gave it to me, straight from the shoulder".

A few years after settling here the elder Decker, while working in the young orchard, fell from a tree and hurt his back. Being deeply religious he vowed to build and to maintain a chapel if the injury would heal. This it did, and he built the little chapel which has become a landmark thru its many years of existence. The exact time of the building of the chapel cannot be ascertained, but it is known that it stood on the plot before Michael was ordained Priest. During his many visits home he often read Mass and practiced his devours in this small building.

According to the best recollection of older residents the chapel was built about 1856, and this must be accepted as authentic information, as no records are available to ascertain the exact date. Originally it was but a crude structure, but thru the years of its existence it has been made into a pretty little house of worship. It seems that the older residents were more demonstrative in the practice of their Faith. We have record of several chapels that were erected by laymen in various sections of the land surrounding the settlement of St. Marys. There was the chapel built of bark, which stood on the side of Cross road; this was built by a pious lay Brother of the Monastery, and was a picture of rustic beauty. This road, itself, received its name from the fact that one of those wayside crosses, which are so common in Germany, stood near the road for many years. Then, there was another near the Gross farm, on the old Windfall road. All these were visible objects of pious devotion, and many a weary heart found solace within those small chapels or at the foot of the way-side cross.

By the time Michael Joseph had completed his theological studies he was still too young for ordination to Priesthood, so in 1859 he accepted the post of teacher at the parochial school attached to Holy Trinity Church, on Montrose Avenue, Brooklyn, N. Y., the pastor of which was Rev. John Raffener, Vicar General of the Brooklyn Diocese, where he taught for two years, also playing the organ in the church. In 1861 he returned to St. Vincents to complete his ecclesiastical studies.

On September 20th, 1862, Michael Joseph Decker was ordained for the Priesthood at St. James Pro-Cathedral by the Rt. Rev. Bishop John Loughlin, of Brooklyn, for the diocese of which that city is the Episcopal see.

His first Solemn High Mass was celebrated in St. Marys Church, St. Marys, Pa., on the Feast of the Holy Rosary, October 5th, of the same year, and it was a day of great rejoicing for this town. The large and spacious St. Marys church was in gala attire for the event. The altars were a mass of flowers, lovingly reared and jealously guarded for the occasion, and the congregation turned out to the last soul to do homage to the pride of the parish, the farmers boy to whom such high honor had come. An eye witness to the occasion tells the following:

"Father Decker rode in a buggy from the old Monastery (now the Andrew Kaul Memorial Hospital) to Breckels (near where the present Priory stands) and there he got out. Several young girls, carrying a



wreath of ground pine, were among those who waited his coming. The wreath was placed upon the celebrant's arm, and he walked to the church with an honor guard of Priests, acolytes, the Silver Cornet Band, and many parishoners. The services in the church were simple but most impressive."

"After Holy Mass the celebrant and invited guests—and there were quite a few, including a number of priests, local and visiting—drove to the Decker home where a bountiful repast awaited them. The day was spent in a very sociable manner to celebrate the big event in the young man's life."

It might be said here that the Pilz boys, Father Deckers co-students and comrades, each read his first Mass previously, on consecutive Sundays, the day of each event being observed at the Pilz homestead on St. Alphonse Road, now called Ford Avenue.

These priests, however, were not the first to read their first Holy Mass in St. Marys church; in 1850 Reverend Father Erhard performed this sacred function in this place of worship. He was not a St. Marys boy, but coming from Germany, with no relatives in this country, he came to the young settlement when it came time for him to offer his first Sacrifice of the Mass as a priest. Since then many boys of this parish have entered Holy Orders, and the event of the first Mass of each always was an occasion of great rejoicing on the part of the parishoners. Scarcely a year passes without a solemnity of this nature taking place in the town, showing that God's blessing is still with the place that was named in honor of His Holy Mother.

Father Decker was vested in Minor Orders on the 7th of September, followed by Sub Deacon on the 17th, and Deacon on the 19th of the same month, Holy Orders coming, as stated before, on the 20th.

As soon as the brief period allotted him for vacation after ordination expired Father Decker was assigned to St. James' Pro-Cathedral, Brooklyn, the scene of his ordination, as assistant to the Reverend Rector. Here he took up his labors with vigour, but in less than a year from the time of his appointment his health began to fail, and he was granted leave of absence for a month to regain his lost strength. At the end of his leave he was so far recuperated that he returned to Brooklyn to again take up his duties.

This interval at home was spent by the Reverend Father on the parental farm, out of doors, mostly, and invigorating air, the exercise and the simple, wholesome food prepared by Katherine, his brother's wife, soon brought back the strength to his body and when he returned to resume his duties he was well fitted, physically, to carry on his work. During this period spent at home, as well as on every occasion of his visits to St. Marys, and on every occasion Father Decker was a constant visitor to the small chapel which his devout father had built for the glorification of his Creator, and here, within its small confines, he often led his neighbors in prayer. It was to this tabernacle that he came when death took from him those whom he loved best—father, mother, brother. Is it then a wonder that this unpretentious house of God should be held in reverence? He led others to higher religious ideals thru his own impassioned zeal. He practiced what he preached—the striving for Life after death by walking the ways of the Lord.

His spiritual zeal while assistant at St. James' did not go unnoticed and when he came back to Brooklyn he was advanced to the pastorate of St. Margaret's church of Middlevillage, Long Island. Along with this

charge came mission work at St. Michael's church, East New York, and the combined parishes gave the ardent young priest ample opportunity to exercise to the fullest his desire for work in matters spiritual. In May of the next year, 1864, he was again called to Brooklyn, this time as pastor of St. Boniface's, which has since become a very large and thriving parish.

Ever an energetic and tireless worker, Father Decker found an outlet for his feverish zeal during an epidemic of cholera, which visited Brooklyn in the middle Sixties, and so strenuously did he labor to bring succor and both spiritual and temporal succor to the stricken parish that his health again failed him. However, he continued to apply himself ardently to the ministration of his calling, with the result that in 1868, after four years as pastor of St. Boniface's, he was forced to lay down his work and recuperate his lost vitality. Then, for a period of one year allotted him, there was joy in his home town and among his home folks to have the beloved Father in their midst for now they could administer to him. For nearly a year he remained at home, striving to regain his lost health and strength.

The salubrious mountain air, together with rest and quiet, and the absence of worry and care, wrought good service, and before the year, which his Bishop had granted him, was over he was again in active service. He did a bit of work here and there until the Rt. Rev. Bishop Mullen, of the Erie diocese, now deceased, adopted him for a period of five years. At the end of the period Bishop Mullen, being so favorably impressed with the zeal of his portage, adopted him permanently as a priest of his diocese, and he remained in that service until his death.

Preceding the time of his formal adoption by Bishop Mullen, Father Decker had been temporary pastor of St. Agatha's church in Meadville, Pa. While here he began the construction of the church which still stands as a monument to his untiring efforts. However, he could not complete the edifice for, as it was nearing completion he was, on December 20th, 1871, removed to Shamburg, a small town in the oil regions but now like so many others of its kind, extinct. This town was located not far from Titusville, but lost its identity when the oil boom subsided. From Shamburg he attended missions at Pleasantville and at Pithole, that den of iniquity, which was generally conceded to be the "toughest town in Pennsylvania." Father Decker made his visits to these places on horseback, over roads which, for the greater part of the year, were practically impassable thru the excessive amount of heavy hauling that was necessitated in bringing food and oilwell supplies to the towns and oil fields about them. In Pithole, especially, the Catholics were few, and the gamblers, prostitutes and hi-jackers many, but that did not deter the indefatigable priest from attending to the spiritual needs of the few who made up his flock. In all sorts of weather, and over all kinds of roads, he made his visits on schedule time, and kept alive the spark of True Faith in the hearts of those to whom he administered.

The need for priests being so urgent in the Erie diocese, and the Reverend Bishop being so highly impressed with the zeal of the young priest, Father Decker was formally adopted by Bishop Mullen at the expiration of the five year probation term. This was in 1873, satisfactory arrangements having been reached between the Bishop of Erie and the Bishop of Brooklyn. Then, from that time until his death Father Decker functioned as a priest in the Erie diocese.

Immediately upon his formal adoption Father Decker was appoint-



ed as pastor of St. John's church, then a small parish, but since grown into one of the larger congregations in the city of Erie. He held this position until called from earth by death in 1913, forty years later.

When he arrived to take charge Father Decker found that St. John's was located at Marvintown, a suburb of Erie, with but fifty-five families to the parish. A frame church, 30 by 60 feet, and an unpretentious residence, made up the property. A part of the ground belonging to the church was planted to fruit trees--a veritable little country estate, but in the line of the city's advance. The church was somewhat enlarged in 1885, for by that time the normal growth had brought the city proper to the edges of its confines. Realizing the ultimate necessity for a larger place of worship, Father Decker began to prepare for the inevitable. By 1899 he was ready to proceed with his building program, and the cornerstone of the present building was laid that year by Bishop Fitzmaurice, also deceased, who succeeded Bishop Mullen as Bishop of the Erie diocese. Work on the building was rushed and the following year, Bishop Fitzmaurice being in Europe, the new church was dedicated to the service of God by Bishop Hortsman, of Cleveland. It is a fine structure, one of which any congregation might justly feel proud. It is located on the corner of 26th and Wallace streets, is of the Romanesque style of architecture, massive in proportions, yet simple in design and decoration.

Besides building the church during his forty years as pastor of St. John's, Father Decker also built a large and commodious school, and other buildings were erected under his supervision. It is said that at pre-war estimates the value of the church property was over \$125,000, yet during the entire period of raising this enormous amount he applied himself assiduously to the spiritual affairs of his parish, doing the work unassisted for many years. In July, 1895, however, he was given an assistant, Rev. John H. Heibel being assigned to this position. In 1897 Father Heibel was succeeded by Rev. John Tipp. Rev. Joseph Schroeder, Rev. Joseph A. Kuntz and Rev. Joseph B. Brock also were assistants during Father Decker's term as pastor of St. John's.

Besides being pastor of the parish, and principal, as well as instructor in his parochial school, Father Decker held the offices of Synodal Examiner, Defensor Matrimonii, and Diocesan Consultor. These offices brought him considerable labor aside from his parish work, and besides, there was the constant call for his speaking services in, and from many points outside of, Erie.

Rev. Felix J. Wiersbinski was appointed second assistant to the pastor of St. John's on November 1st, 1907, and four years later a third assistant in the person of Rev. Carl L. Heidt, was given Father Decker, due to his failing health. This was in 1911, two years before his demise.

Father Decker was a very eloquent speaker. He was possessed of a clear, sonorous voice, the trained voice of a thoro musician, and his delivery from the pulpit was such that he always held his audience spell-bound. His fame as an orator had spread to a great radius, and he often was called to long distances to deliver sermons or lectures. To hear Father Decker speak, in either the English or the German language, was a rare treat at all times.

As a musician Father Decker was possessed of extraordinary talents and, had he chosen to follow this art as a profession, could easily have ranked high as either composer or performer. He was adept on the pipe organ, and highly efficient on a number of other instruments, not-

ably the violin, viola, bass, French horn, and flute. Of either of those he was a master, playing very difficult compositions at will, but it was as a composer that he left his most lasting memorial. He specialized in writing church music, quite naturally, and several of his works have been published. They are "Missa Sanctae Mariae" and "Missa Sanctae Elizabeth", masses for mixed voices, an a "Veni Creator". His unpublished works are "Missa Sanctae Michaelis", "Missa Sanctae Clementis", an "Ave Maria", and a hymn to the honor of St. John the Baptist. Among these his favorite was the Ave Maria, which he often played on the organ.

It seems almost incredible that so much activity could be crowned into one man's life, but Father Decker was a methodical and indefatigable worker, and would not countenance an idle moment.

Rt. Rev. Bishop Fitzmaurice appreciated to a broad extent the zeal and the never ceasing labor of Father Decker and in recognition of these qualifications, coupled with his broad and liberal learning and his high mentality, requested from Rome recognition for the priest. Accordingly, on December 18th, 1903, Father Decker was raised to the dignity of Domestic Prelate of the household of Pope Pius X, and on February 14th, 1904, he was solemnly vested in the purple robe of a Monsignor in the midst of a large gathering of admiring and jubilant friends.

About seven years after this great honor had been bestowed upon him Monsignor Decker's health again began to fail. He now was in his 74th year, and had been in a somewhat weakened condition for some time. His physicians, after close observation, advised an operation, to which he submitted at the Johns Hopkins Hospital, Baltimore, Md., on October 21st 1911. The operation was a complete success, but he did not fully regain his strength. His years of labor in the vineyard of the Lord were claiming their dues, and his age was such that but little could be hoped for.

On September 24th, 1912, he commemorated his Golden Jubilee as Priest, and the event was celebrated with great pomp and enthusiasm by his myriad of friends and admirers. The entire clergy of the Erie diocese, with many others, as well as a large portion of the laity of Erie, attended, and a lengthy program was carried out but alas, the stricken prelate could not fully enjoy the occasion, due to his weakened condition.

He sank gradually, and those who knew him best could see that his days were numbered. On Thursday night, March 10th, 1913, he breathed his last, and his soul was wafted to the Home to reach which he had so faithfully labored while on earth. Gathered at his bedside when the end came were his assistants, Rev. Joseph R. Brock, Rev. Felix J. Wiersbinski, Rev. Carl L. Heidt, Rev. Joseph W. Sieverding, of Warren, and nurses and Sisters. His death was calm and peaceful, more as a passing into restful slumber than as a severance of the immortal soul from the mundane body.

The news of the beloved priest's death brought deep sorrow to all who knew him. From all parts of the diocese, and from the outside, too, came messages and messengers of condolence to the parish upon the loss of him whom all held so dear.

Solemnly chanting the Litany, more than a score of priests on the Monday following his death escorted the body from the parish house to St. John's Church. Monday night it lay in state in the church under guard of four societies namely the Knights of St. George, Holy Name Society, St. John Society, and Branch 18, Catholic Mutual Benefit Assoc-



iation. During the day various church societies spent an hour each about the casket in special devotion. Approximately three thousand persons viewed the body.

A Pontifical High Mass was offered for the repose of the soul of the beloved departed next morning, Rt. Rev. Bishop Fitzmaurice being the Celebrant; Rev. Lachemaier, of Erie, and Rev. Kunz, of Corry, were Deacons of Honor; Rev. Tipp, of Hammett and Rev. Brock, of Erie, the Sub-Deacons, Rev. Father Donnelly Master of Ceremonies, and Rev. Father Heidt, Assistant. The funeral oration was preached by Rev. Father Auth, eloquent Redemptorist priest, who had been a great friend of the deceased clergyman.

Large and spacious as it is, St. John's church was too small that day to hold all the sorrowing people who wanted to enter and thus to do last homage to their beloved pastor and friend, and many had to contend themselves to stand before the doors and offer up their prayers from there. It is doubtful if a larger assemblage of mourners ever congregated at St. John's than on this sad occasion.

The casket bearers were Rev. J. J. F. Lachemaier, Rev. William F. Dwyer, Rev. James Cauley, Rev. Frank J. Bender and Rev. Francis Roaczewski.

The casket containing the remains was brought to St. Marys that (Tuesday) evening on the train arriving at 10:30, and was taken to the home of Mr. and Mrs. George Decker, Jr., the former a nephew of the deceased priest. The casket was in charge of Undertaker Brugger, of Erie, and a large number of relatives and friends of Erie, and intermediate points, accompanied the remains.

Throughout the evening and all the next day hundreds of persons called to pay their last respects to the departed prelate. The body lay at rest in a beautiful couch casket, and was clothed in the purple robes of his official position in the Church. In his hands was placed a chalice and about his neck was a stole, the emblem of his authority as Priest of the Catholic Church. The casket was embanked with a profusion of floral designs, tributes of esteem from relatives and friends.

The funeral services were conducted Thursday morning. The cortage left the residence at 8:30 o'clock, escorted by the St. John's Society, St. Joseph's Society, Knights of St. George, and the C. M. B.A. besides a large number of sorrowing relatives and friends. At the Monastery the funeral procession was met by the altar boys, the clergy of the diocese, and school children, who escorted the remains to the St. Marys church.

Solemn High Mass was celebrated by Rev. Father Marinus Ferg, O. S. B., assisted by Rev. Father Snilbert Rickert, O. S. B., as Deacon, Rev. Father Herbert Buttner, O. S. B., as Sub-Deacon, and Rev. Father Regis Barrett, O. S. B., as Master of Ceremonies.

The following priests of the Erie diocese were in the sanctuary: Rt. Rev. Mons. Michael Meagher, of Ridgway; Rt. Rev. Mons. Bernard McGivney, of DuBois; Rev. Felix J. Wierhinski and Rev. Joseph B. Brock, of Erie; Rev. John Heibel, of Rasselas; Rev. Edward Hasse, of Lucinda; Rev. Frededick Shields, of Johnsonburg; Rev. George Winkler, of Kersey; Rev. Joseph A. Kuntz, of Corry; Rev. P. J. Flake, of Mt. Jewett; Rev. Alfred Fischer, of Ridgway; Rev. N. J. Fischer, of Morrisdale; Rev. Joseph Orlando, of Force, and Benedictine Fathers Paulinus and Gabriel of St. Marys.

The funeral sermon here was given by Father John Heibel of

Rassellas, who was a lifelong child of Father Decker's parish. His text was "Thou Art Priest According To The Order of Melchisedech". It was a glowing tribute upon the life work of the deceased prelate, delivered by a man who knew him, and in a manner which held his hearers enthralled. His eloquent presentations brought tears to the eyes of many that crowded the stately church edifice. Among other instances the speaker referred to the fact that after death, the lips of the deceased refused to remain closed, as tho they would fain continue to preach the word of God although mute in death.

After the Libra all present viewed the remains before leaving the church for the cemetery. The funeral procession from the church to the grave was solemnly impressive. The hundreds of school children lined the walk, reciting prayers in unison for the repose of the soul of the beloved departed until the entire procession had passed. The men societies of the church were the guard of honor and escorted the funeral car on the street.

The casket bearers were George and Fred Decker, Alfred Hacherl, Leo Schneider, Joseph Wienzierl, and Edward Snyder, all grandnephews of Monsignor Decker, and some of the beautiful floral pieces were carried by Frank Hacherl and George Kronenwetter, also grandnephews.

After the procession had arrived at the grave the Very Reverend Celebrant, with his assistants, intoned the Benedictus, which was sung alternately by the clergy present. The remains were laid to rest in the family burial lot, between the graves of his father and mother, thus carrying out a wish often expressed by the deceased. The services at the grave were very impressive, and were attended by one of the largest assemblies ever gathered in the St. Marys cemetery.

Such, then as has here been briefly outlined, is the life of a great man and one who was a high credit to his calling. The high intellectuality of the man, the profound learning which was his, the untiring effort to still further impress the mandates and beauty of Holy Church upon the world—these were some of the factors which made Monsignor Decker's life such a model for others to strive to emulate, while his joviality and good naturedness, and his democratic manner made him a man whose company always was sought by the people of every day life.

His intellectual accomplishments were unusual; he mastered several arts—music, elocution, particularly, and being a student who delved deep into the storehouse of knowledge, was considered an authority in Catholic theology and philosophy and was always given respectful audience in the councils of the church. His musical talent has been touched upon in this brief biography, but how futile the attempt to show, even in a measure, the proficiency to which he had trained himself in this art. To hear him draw forth harmony and fugue, melody and thoro-bass from the pipe organ was like being led by a celestial hand into realms of tone that were not from this earth. To hear him create tones and tunes from the violin, the viola, cello, or even the lowly bass viol, was transposition into a life beyond the present, and still it was not execution that made him great in the art—it was his ability to set down on paper works such as he has left to perpetuate his memory. En solo, or en duetto, quartette—in unison or harmony, in majors or in minors—the world of acoustics was his: he had conquered the field, and stood master of tonal existence, of tonal combinations which is called Music. In this one field alone, he would have been a great man, but this was only a by-accomplishment of the man. His elocution was another art that he had acquired. Blessed



with a clear, sonorous voice, and the power of keen, quick, deep thinking, a persuasive eloquence at all times, Monsignor Decker stood in the foremost ranks of orators in this part of the country. The writer well remembers, as must many others who will read these memoirs, how the word that Father Decker would deliver the sermon of a Sunday in the St Marys church, would always fill that spacious edifice to the very portals. His voice would easily fill the large space of the church which, as all know, is not built on lines to give the best acoustic results. In either German or English, Father Decker could handle a subject in a manner very rarely heard. Both his German and his English were without a flaw—clear, pure, strong.

Monsignor Decker was a business man, too, along with his other graces. This fact is attested by the churches and church proprieties he built and maintained. He had a keen perspicuity, a clear insight into values, and the ability to handle his own finances and his own deals, and always in a way that proved him far ahead of the average man of business. And from his successful upbuild of the various parishes of which he was pastor it follows that he also was a good organizer, for he mixed with his parishoners on a democratic basis, and held them together with bonds that are stronger than any other—the bonds of love and friendship. The various church societies, both of men and of women, the schools, in fact, the very parishes, were products of the priest's wonderful power of organization. The splendid condition of his societies, and the high moral tone of all who were fortunate enough to be numbered among his parishoners are ample proof that his ability in this line was secondary to none other.

Brought up in a community where poverty ran rampant, Monsignor Decker could sympathize with those who were not blessed with worldly goods. His youth had shown him what it meant to deprive oneself of all but the bare necessities of life. He lived here, within speaking distance of where the monument is being erected to his memory, when everything that could not be grown on the farm had to be brought by teams from long distances; when storms, bad roads, or accidents overtook the teams there were times when not even bread could be had, and Father Decker used to mention these incidents in later life. And then, after he had ascended thru sheer power of will to heights exalted in clerical circles, did he scorn those of lower state? Not he—he was democratic to a high degree, and never too far removed to hold conversation with the most lowly.

To the beloved Father Decker there was no higher worldly sphere than his love of parents, and his brother and wife, and later, of their children and grandchildren. As often as he could he would visit the parental home, and these were the days that always were joyous ones for him. And when, in the course of events, his parents were called from hence how his loving heart grieved! When his brother George died the Father was prevailed upon to read the Requiem Mass. All went well until he tried to intone the "Requiescant in pace" but his voice broke and the strung, stout man shook with suppressed sobs. The homestead had been willed to him by his father. This he left to his brothers heirs so that the old home should remain in the family while he was on earth. In all ways and at all times he showed his love for his relatives, and seldomly failed to spend some time in prayer in the graveyard at the mounds which marked the last resting place of those he loved best.

As a man Father Decker presented a handsome figure. He was of

fine build and was possessed of a charming personality. To know him was to take to him, and he could converse on almost any subject intelligently. He knew the world—he knew life; he was cognizant of the trials and temptations that beset the pilgrim on the highway of existence from the cradle to the grave, and knowing, could aid the one who sought such aid. He was gentle as a child in his reasoning with a strayed lamb in his effort to bring it back to the Fold. When sorrow beclouded the firmament of any about him he ministered as gently as a mother, as many can testify, but woe to any who crossed him in a spirit of beligerency. In all his dealings he held uppermost in mind the Golden Rule, and practised the principal of live and let live.

Life on earth for this great man has ended; the record of its accomplishments are written into the archives in letters of granite so that it may never be effaced by the trend of time. Great achievements, like virtues, bring their own reward, and it is but a menial attempt that can be made to do honor fully to a man so great as was Monsignor Decker. Still, a world may place tribute at the shrine of the mighty, and so to him, whom we rever, we bow in admiration of the example he set in Christian fortitude and pray that the seeds of Catholicity which he sowed while in our midst may bear bountiful fruit, forever and ever.







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